

Epiphany 5 B 2018

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 4, 2018

[Isaiah 40:21-31](#); [Mark 1:29-39](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. Today's first reading contains what is justifiably one of the most popular verses in the Bible. Today's first reading concluded in sentences that use the following words: *Faint. Weary. Exhausted. Powerless.* And these words: *Strength. Power. Renew. Run.* God is portrayed as powerful. Supremely and serenely powerful. And in today's passage, God's opponents are dismissed as trivial, lightweight, and temporary. Grasshoppers. "He brings princes to naught." "And makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." And even the young, the prophet says, will faint, and grow weary, and fall exhausted. But in contrast to the young, in contrast to princes and rulers, those who wait for the Lord will have their strength renewed.

I think this passage is worthy of your attention. I think this famous passage is worthy of your meditation. I believe sincerely and profoundly that this might truly be God's word to us all right now in many ways and on many levels.

This first reading is Isaiah 40. This chapter of the Bible is so important to me that when I was ordained, I was allowed to pick one or two lessons for my ordination service. And I chose the first part of Isaiah chapter forty. Because it's such an important message, framed in eloquent poetry that is quite beautiful but often sarcastic. Whenever I listen to George Frederick Handel's *Messiah* oratorio it opens with an instrumental piece, an overture, the *Sinfonia*. And then the very first words the oratorio begin. A tenor. Isaiah chapter forty, verse one. *Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.*

This morning's chapter of Isaiah is a new moment in that massive 66-chapter book. It is a new message to the Jewish people. It is a new reality in the history of the Jewish people. They had once had a king. Now they had no king. These words are written a few decades after the last king. They once had a capital city. Now they had no city, and they were living as slaves in another land. Babylon. Once they had a temple that was a wonder of the ancient world. And now that temple was no more. Once they were proud. Too proud, according to Isaiah. And now they have been brought low. This is the moment when God commands Isaiah to comfort his people. To speak tenderly to them. To tell them that princes and rulers are grasshoppers and grasses. To tell them that God will renew them.

Now, in hindsight, history shows that God DID do that. He created a highway through the wilderness— to use Isaiah’s words— he unlocked doors and opened gateways so that collectively the people were renewed. And the story of God’s chosen people continued. And the temple was rebuilt. And eventually Jesus would be in that rebuilt city, and that rebuilt temple. And Christianity would come forth out of Judaism. But nobody knew that five and a half centuries before Jesus was born. All they knew was that they had lost a great deal. And today’s lesson is God’s word, through the prophet, to stir up their hope.

I think that our particular kind of Christianity— let’s say *historic Protestant* denominations— Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Reformed, Methodist— sometimes called the mainline churches, sometimes called the European Protestants— our particular kind of Christianity used to enjoy a position of social prestige and respect. Families were convinced that congregations like Dove of Peace were essential to their well-being, to their happiness, and to the direction of their lives. We had large and vast institutional resources. And now we are less. We have declined. Dove of Peace has fewer members, and much older members, than it has had since it was founded 55 years ago. And Dove of Peace is by no means alone or unique. We are reflective of our denomination as a whole. And our denomination has not declined as much as some of our sister Protestant churches.

I think we feel depleted. I know I do. Things that we once could take for granted do not automatically happen.

When you have 150 kids in Vacation Bible School, you may think “Here is God.” When you don’t have Vacation Bible School, you may wonder where the presence of God is in our midst. That’s definitely how the audience of Isaiah chapter 40 was feeling.

There are two little pieces of Hebrew language that I want you to know about. One is about the wings of the eagles. Like many of us, the Israelites— the Jews— were fascinated by eagles and hawks. They are magnificent creatures. They occur a great deal in the Bible as metaphors and images of God and God’s power.

Let me pause, on this Superbowl Sunday, to say that my words about eagles this morning are not an endorsement of any particular faction or party within the National Football League. But scholars and historians understand that the Jewish people hearing Isaiah’s words believed that eagles shed their wings and grew new wings. In our more scientific age, we call it “molting.” If you’ve ever been around a real eagle’s nest when they are molting it is very impressive. The sheer volume of feathers. Eagles don’t really lose their wings and grow new ones. But that’s what the writers and readers of the Bible thought. And so that peculiar language: “*Mount up with wings like eagles*” is misleading. The original language really refers to growing new wings. So it is really a promise that those who wait for the Lord will grow new wings. It’s not an image of power and flight. It’s an image of renewal.

And secondly, the language that says “wait for the Lord” is not as passive as it sounds. In fact,

the Hebrew word in that phrase is often translated as “look for the Lord.” Those who *look* for the Lord. Those who seek the Lord shall renew their strength. They will get new wings, like eagles do. They shall run and not be weary they shall walk and not faint. I even looked up weary and faint in Hebrew. Faint is sort of weak. Weary is tired and burned out. Two different things. I’m sure you– like me– are perfectly capable of feeling both at the same time.

So contrary to what you may have heard or thought when you’ve seen these words on a bumper sticker or you’ve seen these words on a sweatshirt: this is no glib or facile promise from God. This is a Word of God to people who feel seriously down and out. Who feel lost. Who feel like losers in a world that emphasizes youth and power, a world where might appears to make right. *Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”?* And this is not a simplistic Word of God about running marathons and getting gold medals. This is an encouragement to “*wait*” for God, to look for God, to open up to new ways and unexpected ways that God might be present and acting in our lives. Rather than in the old idols and the old illusions that surround us just as these Jews were surrounded by them in Babylon.

So for many reasons and in many ways, this part of Isaiah– today’s first reading– can and should be a word of encouragement. They speak to us personally, especially if we feel old and invisible in a society that worships the gods and idols of youthfulness. And they speak to us collectively, as congregations and churches that no longer enjoy the privileges and prestige that we once enjoyed, as Christians who must learn again what it is to be faithful, what it means to wait for the Lord. Amen.